

This is an interview with Mr. Ralph Siddoway on 4 December 1978. The interview is being conducted at the Golden Age Center by Mike Brown and concerns the Echo Park Dam controversy.

Mike Brown (MB): What was your involvement with the Echo Park Dam deal?

Ralph: The whole community was quite interested in the darn thing. I was mayor and that's why I had some little part in it. I didn't have anything to do with the technical part of it, or really anything to do with the political movement of it, only just to lend moral support is about all I had to do with it.

We were all real interested in it because we thought we were going to get irrigation water and also culinary water and power from the Echo Park Dam. The Echo Park Dam, as we were told, would supply a lot of irrigation water for Ashley Valley. In fact, according to the survey as I understand it, it would run right to what's now Dinosaur, Colorado. The canal would run right through there carrying water for irrigation. A lot of the people were real excited about it because, of course, water means crops and crops mean wealth and that's why they were interested in it mainly.

But it was also supposed to carry culinary water for Vernal City and that, as I understand it, is why in the first place they were going to let the [water from the] virgin springs [of] the Uinta Mountains be transported over to Utah and Salt Lake Counties, because it would be replaced with this good water out of Echo Park. Of course, it didn't turn out that way, we didn't put the Echo Park Dam in and that's where the best water was.

MB: What are the earliest things you remember about that, about the dam? I guess it had been kicking around for quite a while.

Ralph: Oh, for as long as I can remember there've been people making surveys on Green River and telling all about putting a dam in Green River. I thought it was just another fairy tale, like they was going to build a railroad into Vernal. Neither one of them really happened.

It was an immense project—to me it was awfully immense. I guess there have been some bigger projects than that on the line; but it looked like almost an impossibility to me to dam off Green River. But that was going around when I was just a kid. I didn't really pay much attention to it because I didn't think it would ever happen.

MB: Would that have brought quite a bit of revenue into Vernal City?

Ralph: No, I don't think it would have brought any early revenue into the city except we would have had an ample supply of culinary water like we [do] now. The population grew to the size it is now, we would have had enough water. It would have been cheaper water than you can get today, a lot cheaper. It would have been good water, too.

MB: You said you went to Washington at one time?

Ralph: Yeah, there was a whole group of us went. There was one city councilman, and the mayor, and I think two Uintah County Commissioners, and then the Chamber of Commerce and some of the civic clubs, and some citizens that had a real interest in it went back there. I think one time was around twenty-five people from Vernal back there. We were just supposed to talk to the congressmen and see if we couldn't interest them in the project.

Of course, it was more or less of a novelty to see so many people from a little town back in Washington. They did create quite an impression. They had some real experts there, too. Dean Clyde was an engineer from USU, he taught engineering there for a long time. He was really well informed about it. He was the one that really wanted to lead out in the technical part of it. He did understand it and he knew what he was talking about. But the rest of us mostly were just laborers that just had an interest in seeing if we couldn't get the dam developed by the federal government.

MB: You being mayor at the time, who paid for your way out there?

Ralph: Vernal City paid for it. They paid my way and one councilman, Dale Jensen. Dale was pretty knowledgeable on water projects, too. He'd made quite a study of it and he was real well versed on the thing.

MB: How long were you out there altogether?

Ralph: I don't remember for sure. It seems to me it was about five or six days in Washington, and we flew back, so it was only a couple days en route, one day going and one day coming.

MB: Did you just go out once yourself?

Ralph: Yeah, that's all I went. Some of the others went several times. Bry Stringham and Hugh Colton and Lawrence Siddoway and Dean Clyde, some of those people went several times, but I only went once.

MB: Did you participate in the lobbying?

Ralph: No. I did talk to some of the congressmen and maybe a couple of senators out there, but I wasn't knowledgeable enough to do a lot of lobbying. I just told them why we were there and what we were doing. I didn't have really enough influence at that time to really be a lobbyist; but you'd be surprised at how congressmen, or any elected official, respect the opinion of another elected official, even if it's just a small city or county official. They really listen to you. So we did get to talk, but to do any real lobbying, that was left to some of the other people.

MB: Do you remember who you talked to, which states?

Ralph: Yeah, Colorado, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Arizona, those are the ones I recall right at the moment.

MB: You went around to quite a few then.

Ralph: Yeah, that's about all we had to do for four or five days. Like I say, we didn't always get to talk to the congressmen, but wherever we knocked on the congressmen's door, clerk or stenographer or somebody would take you into the office and either make an appointment for you or else you couldn't be seen for today or tomorrow or the next day; but as a rule, nearly everyone that you tried to get into to see was real courteous. Sometimes they were tied up and they were busy.

I know one thing that surprised me. I went into the Congress, the House of Representatives, meeting. That was supposed to be a full house there. When I got in there, there was about ten times as many vacant chairs as there was filled chairs. I thought they was playing hooky, but some of the congressmen told me, no, that they don't always sit through all those meetings because they have more important things outside. They have to really prepare for the meetings outside. If there's anything important to be voted on, they show up for the vote, but a lot of those lengthy debates, they don't even pretend to go to.

MB: Were these like sub-committee meetings?

Ralph: Yeah, I think that plain meetings, the other congressmen writing the bills, getting the legwork done before they get into the house meeting. I thought that 200 to 300 people would be in there and it would be a real orderly thing, but it wasn't. It was a lot more vacant seats than there were filled seats.

MB: This was the House sub-committee hearing for the Colorado River storage thing. What do you remember about that meeting? Some of the people you heard talk?

Ralph: I remember first Dean Clyde, I think, carried most of the weight from Utah. He talked, and Vivian Watkins was a former Vernal person and he was senator at that time. He was there and the congressman from Colorado wielded quite an influence. I can't remember his name—Aspenaw—he was really a power in there. He knew his way around and was real knowledgeable about what was going on. The one that I remember the most is Sailor from Pennsylvania. He was real antagonistic towards the program. I think he had more to do with defeating the thing than any other one person. He was exceptionally knowledgeable. He was an antagonist, but he had been down the Colorado River several times and he knew what it was, and he was determined that there would never be a dam in it. That seemed to be his whole life mission, and that seemed to be his sole purpose. While he was antagonistic to our point of view, you have to admire the knowledge, the finesse and power that that man had. He was extremely powerful.

Some of the other people that I remember are Dr. Brontis and Ernie Untermann. Untermann was a professional geologist and he had studied this country a lot. He had been up and down that country afoot and horseback and every other way, and he knew a lot about it. He had written a real interesting, and I thought real enlightening, paper on it; and he presented it at the hearing. He is a man who has a dry wit. He doesn't bowl you over with the funny-paper wit, a real undercurrent of dry wit that he had. He was real well accepted, even by Mr. Sailor; he was accepted as a man that knew what he was talking about.

Bry Stringham had been studying the thing quite a lot and he presented a paper at the hearing. He, at that time, I think, was state senator and he had been the mayor of Vernal, he had

been the state congressmen and at that time, I think, he was state senator. He had been studying the thing for a long time and he was quite knowledgeable. Those are some of the people that I remember.

MB: Can you tell me about this guy Frazier?

Ralph: He went down the river several times in an old wood boat with the Hatchses. He was one of the early-timers to go down that river. He was one of the witnesses there. I didn't hear him give his testimony, but he was one of the real early men that went down the river—not like Ashley or those people, but I think along in the 1920s he was going down Green River. Went down it several times and he'd formed very definite opinions about what he thought should be done and could be done.

There was also some people from UP & L company who were surveyors who had been there; and they gave testimony, but I can't remember what they really said. Dr. Brodis was one of the real scientific men that I remember. He was a naturalist and a writer and a lecturer. His vocabulary was something I'd never heard before. He could describe the beauty of those canyons down there, it was just unbelievable the descriptive words that man had. It was, I think, of all the witnesses that I heard or saw there, he was accepted better than anybody. He didn't want to see the beauty disturbed of the canyons. He did enjoy it so much and he was a naturalist. It was, as I remember, his opinion. It was that even at the expense of destroying some of the beauty, you could save a lot of the beauty that a lot of the people could see, that never could see it without a dam in it. He was rather in favor of doing the dam.

The thing that I remember about Brodis, he was quite an elderly man at that time, and I don't know his official position at that time, but I do know that he held a doctorate degree and he was a naturalist. He had done some writing. I don't know how extensive his writing is, but he does quite a little writing, I know. His description of Echo Park and the canyon, all the canyon clear through from Flaming Gorge to Split Mountain, he described that thing just as vivid as, better than I've ever heard described before or since. It just struck me that he, being as knowledgeable as he was and still an environmentalist as he was, still wanting to retain the beauty that he captured there, he still thought the dam should be put in. It was real unusual and Sailor, the one who attacked almost every witness, complimented this particular gentleman and said what a fine presentation he had made, and the only thing he could disagree with was his conclusion.

MB: Sailor was the one from Pennsylvania. What was the basis of Sailor's objections? Do you remember?

Ralph: Yeah, in the first place, it was a national monument. The second place, he didn't want to see any disturbance in a place of beauty, of natural beauty that that was, and I don't know whether it was true or not, but he was often accused of being representative of the money powers of California. Stop the water from being stopped up in the upper states so it continues to go on down to California. I don't know if that's true or not, but he was accused of that.

MB: Was that an issue at the time or an argument?

Ralph: Yeah, it was an issue.

MB: What, the Californians?

Ralph: California wanted the water; but an agreement had been reached with the upper states that they would have so much water, and I can't give you that. But the upper states would have so much water and the rest of it would go down to California. Of course, when the upper states start using their water, why it won't go to California. California historically has been using it all the time. The upper states were given the right to so much water. Of course, if you stop the water and use it up here in Utah and Colorado, why, naturally, California don't get it.

MB: Haven't they gotten some of the power from further down, though?

Ralph: Yeah, I think, a lot of power is going on down to California. The actual water, they're still getting that, too. But like you say, a lot of the power is manufactured clean up in Washington that goes around to California. The Hoover Dam, they get a lot of power from that.

MB: I take it there was a lot of interstate rivalry?

Ralph: Yeah, there was, quite a bit of state rivalry. For a long time, Colorado and Utah couldn't even get together on it. They disagreed with how much water they thought each one should have, the advantage they should get out of it.

MB: I assume that dam would have benefitted northwestern Colorado, too.

Ralph: They would get a lot of benefit out of it.

MB: How would the dam going in have affected the livestock business here?

Ralph: It would affect it very materially. I think one of the first things it would have done, what we call the public domain as BLM land, I think, would have been taken up for farms. A lot of it would have been. A lot of that country is fertile land with no water. That would have made water available all through the Deadman Bench and Snake John country through there. All that country is good fertile land and it was expected that that would be irrigated land. If it were irrigated, naturally, the livestock couldn't graze it, so the ones that were in the livestock business at that time stood to lose their grazing privileges. But, oh, one acre of irrigated land would produce as much as maybe one hundred acres of that land out there does now.

We may have become a feeding country instead of a grazing country. Like there in California, our calves and lambs are all shipped down to California to fatten, not all of them but a lot of them. We may have become a feeding country like that if we had had the water.

MB: So, you say a lot of the people who held permits out there would have lost them?

Ralph: Yeah, I'm sure they would, 'cause that land would have been farm land.

MB: What do you think would have been the most singular benefit to our area for that thing to go through? Would it have been the water or the power or what?

Ralph: I really don't have a wide enough scope of knowledge to answer that really intelligently. My thinking was at that time, and still is, that the water applied to the land would have lasted forever and reproduced an abundance of food—even a greater abundance than we have now. And that was one of the arguments that Mr. Sailor used against us. We were producing more food then we could sell. But I think it would have produced an abundance of food to people from that time from then on.

While we do have an abundance of food, we still have people that are hungry, and you still have people that are starving as far as that goes. So I don't think it's really an oversupply of food, it's just a matter of under-supplying the demand. The demand is there, but there's no way to supply it. When four to five million people go to bed hungry every night, it doesn't look to me like an oversupply of food. I think that would have been the greatest value, but, of course, the power value was an immense thing, too. Dollar-wise it may have been greater than the other, I don't know.

MB: What do you think were the major factor or factors that killed the dam?

Ralph: I think the major factors that killed it, the people that had a strong dislike to see any improvement made in the West and still do, they want to see it left just the way it. I can appreciate that, too, but I don't like to see the beauty of nature disturbed. I think that was really the strongest factor that they had. Of course, they had the wedge that it was already a national monument. It was made a national monument purposely to protect it from being disturbed. Sometimes you have to make a choice. I like to see sagebrush flats, but I sure as hell wouldn't like to see Kansas and Nebraska and Davis County go back to sagebrush. So I think there is a time when you have to develop, and logically, you should develop. You should protect all the natural beauty that you can, but you still got to change it.

MB: Do you think that the alternate solution, when they built the dam up at Flaming Gorge further upriver, do you think that has benefitted the area?

Ralph: Oh, it has benefitted it a lot. But nothing like it would have done if we'd've got Echo Park, because that was an irrigation project, and Flaming Gorge is not. You don't get any irrigation water out of Flaming Gorge, and the other would have been. So that now, as I said a minute ago, I didn't like to see the beauty disturbed, perhaps you never did see the bottom of Flaming Gorge. Beautiful thing. But where maybe one hundred people would see that gorge without the dam, there's probably one thousand see it now with the dam in there. You only see the top of it, but there's still a lot of beauty left there and I think a nice big pond of water in the south is beautiful. So my thinking is that it has helped our end materially, for the beauty alone. I know that some people disagree with that and say that the old rough canyon down there was a lot more beautiful than it is now, but not to me. I like it the way it is now. It has certainly made it a lot more accessible to people. That's disregarding all the value the power has. Just for a fishing place and a place to go and boat and a place just to look at for beauty, is worth I would say a thousand times more than it was when I was a kid and walked down in the bottom of the thing,

because, hell, nobody got to see it the other way. Very few people would ever go down there, but now a lot of people see it.

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